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Small businesses and their social media audiences – What inspires consumers to like pages of small catering establishments[1]

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It is primordial for brand owners to map their own community, to stimulate their social-focused communication activity. This is especially true for (typically small) catering enterprises, where social media is often the only available communication tool. It is then important to investigate the SME environment and provide adapted solutions to their needs. Moreover, a strong influence of the owner/ managers' personality can turn to competitive advantage in the high-cluttered and personalized environment of social media. In our empirical research, we content analyse consumer narratives (n=151) in search of the inner motives of members of brand communities for engaging with their most preferred catering establishments. Based on our analysis, four categories of motives (information needs, affective motives, individual and social factors, thematic connections) were found and analysed. Our categories confirm prior studies on consumer motivations in social media, while our sub-categories contain novel elements that contribute to the lacking literature of social media use within SME marketing.

Keywords: small and medium-sized enterprises, social media, brand communities, user involvement, inner motivation.

JEL codes: M37, M31.

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Introduction

Social media is a new opportunity for organizations to take advantage of the interactive properties of digital networks in their communication with consumers and other stakeholders (Cheung–Lee 2012). While all forms of communication (one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many) are accessible in social media, organizations need to be aware of the fact that everyone can be a content producer and provider on these channels, and the organization is in direct competition with all other users in a communication environment characterized by high degrees of clutter (Ha–McCann 2008). Moreover, as a 2011 IBM study shows (Baird–Parasnis 2011) companies have some major misconceptions regarding why consumers interact with them via social media. For instance, while totally against the logic of the social character of these platforms, traditional marketing activities, such as discounts and sales come in first, while being part of a community through these channels is less important. However, to build long-term brand involvement, organizations communicating in social media need to primarily focus on becoming an organic part of the consumer-to-consumer conversations (Kozinets et al. 2010). In this context, effective marketing communications need to follow a strategic approach (Csordás et al. 2014), at the expense of a purely short-term transactional approach, so typical for small businesses.

The new communication forms offered by social media go hand in hand with the extending organizations' marketing communications opportunities, scope and tasks. The democratization of information brings about the fact that organizations are not alone anymore to communicate to their target audiences, but users increasingly talk to each other in contexts of consumption (Parsons 2011). This phenomenon introduces a new scope for the marketing of a hybrid communication mix: the organization can keep on communicating to its users through more or less targeted paid channels, but they also have the opportunity to easily create their own interfaces on channels consumers use anyway, and also to access, investigate and potentially to integrate earned media such as related consumer discussion into

their marketing communications strategy. Facebook, the most used social networking service worldwide (Kemp 2015), the focus of our present study is one such channel where organizations can create brand pages which later can operate as a brand community where the organization is being offered a direct communication channel with its stakeholders, supporting their sharing of opinion thus integrating various media channels and communications types to one central space. Thus obtaining valuable consumer information and reacting to them emerges as a new challenge to organizations, hence the need to prospect various aspects of the participation patterns of their stakeholders.

A Facebook community can thus provide a wide range of opportunities for the organization: to listen to their consumers, communicate to and with them, to engage them, to assist them in facilitating consumers making social ties while communicating with each other about the brand (Cova–Cova 2002), and to participate and cooperate in the improvement and development of the organizations' products and services. Thereby – even though it is hardly controllable – the organization can follow and influence the diffusion of user-generated information (Mangold–Faulds 2009).

Organizations can not only inspire consumer commitment through social media channels, but they can also boost loyalty in case they succeed in building a viable community, by giving consumers a reason for continuously interacting with the brand. According to Parent et al. (2011) the organization is capable of triggering consumer activity and participation by offering them relevant contents. This activity can be referred to as the practice of content marketing, or in a wider framework, that of experiential marketing.

These capabilities empower in particular small and medium-sized enterprises, which often work with limited resources but can flexibly adapt to new environments, to build viable connections with their consumers and to intensify them using an adapted social media strategy. Academic research so far, however, is very limited in the area of social media used in small and medium-sized enterprises. Our article

tries to contribute to filling in this gap by first examining the specificities of the SME marketing, then characterizing virtual communities and in the final part, by presenting the results of our study on narratives about small catering establishments' virtual communities.

Characteristics of SME marketing

Small and medium-sized enterprises[5] (hereafter: SMEs) can be considered in many aspects as the motor of economic growth, and thus a backbone of a country's economic activity. The dimensions that most highlight their importance are the stimulation of job creation, competition, local and regional economic development, innovation and entrepreneurial skills (Dallago 2011). In the European Union, SMEs are a key sector as much in terms of employment volume, as in their contribution to GDP growth, investment, and export (Klein 2014).

The definitions of marketing – however – mostly apply to a corporate environment. Carson (1993) suggests that generic marketing terminology needs to be adapted to fit the particularities of SMEs. Although the definition of marketing for the SME context is now present in the marketing literature, it is not widely adopted. A common point is that the SME marketing is often associated in these definitions with entrepreneurial behaviour (Reynolds 2002). According to a number of sources, adapted marketing actions are as much inherent to SMEs as to any other type of business, however the former are heavily influenced by the owner/managers' personality. Yet, as owner-managers often have a wider scope of business goals and ways of conducting business than large corporations, a viewpoint in the literature argues

[5] Are considered as small and medium-sized enterprises those enterprises with a maximum of 250 employees, and that have either an annual turnover not exceeding EUR 50 Million, or an annual balance-sheet total not exceeding EUR 43 Million, that equally conform to the criterion of independence (i.e. those which are not owned as to 25% or more of the capital or the voting rights by one enterprise falling outside the definition of an SME) (European Commission Recommendation 2003/361/EC).

that there cannot be a valid unified description of marketing for the SME environment (Simpson et al. 2006).

According to Reijonen (2010), the main goals in marketing in a SME environment do not differ notably from the general conception (i.e. informing consumers about the organization and its products and services; increasing sales; marketing communication), but the establishment and development of significant and sincere relationships with consumers and business partners is of primary importance in the sector (Hill 2001). The SME marketing is a process of planning and implementation during which a SME proceeds to the elaboration, pricing, communication and distribution of ideas, goods and services with the aim of satisfying individual and organizational goals. Moreover, a marketing process focused on SMEs needs to take into account the different contexts and particularities of the SME environment, such as limited resources, the lack of specialist marketing knowledge, a limited impact on market processes due to their size, and lastly, a strong influence of the owner/managers' personality on the organization's marketing activities. Because of this latter, the SME marketing is in many aspects more irrational and unplanned than its corporate counterpart, and it relies more heavily on the force of the owner/managers' personality and social networks (McCartan-Quinn–Carson 2003), making the SME marketing more informal and casual, more unstructured and spontaneous, and characterized by a slower, reactive adaptation to industry norms (Gilmore et al. 2001).

By dint of the resource constraints, the SME marketing as a whole fails to compete with established companies in the sector. The main objective of our paper by analysing the motives behind their fan community is to investigate a channel where SMEs are able to compete with larger companies in their own way.

Motives to join virtual communities

A common misconception in digital marketing is the fact that organizations need only to create virtual spaces for communities to appear – however these spaces, as much as the communities that thus

emerge need to be managed continually. Thus, to maintain these virtual communities, it is necessary for the organization to generate and support user activity in a strategic manner, requiring both financial and human resources (Csordás et al. 2014). A central element in assisting to the creation and consolidation of a virtual community is to explore the reasons that influence individuals to participate in virtual communities as motivation has been shown to appear as a causal factor for actual behaviour (Goldsmith–Horowitz 2006). In doing so, it is worth considering that consumers react differently to marketing communications in digital and social contexts (Piskorski 2011).

The need to explore user motivations is supported by de Valck et al. (2009. 185) who identify three key streams of research for virtual communities: 1) investigating what motivates people to participate in and contribute to online communities; 2) how companies can use online consumer conversations to extract marketing knowledge; 3) the nature of brand communities and their effect on consumer behaviour. Addressing these issues contributes to the organizations' being able to actively manage their brand communities and create marketing value from them.

The study of the main motivations for the use of social networks can contribute to the investigation of the motivations for joining company-generated Facebook brand communities. Social networking sites' use motivations that can be categorized as 1) cognitive (e.g. information gathering); 2) entertainment and recreation; 3) social connection (e.g. maintaining relations, social interaction); 4) habitual use and pastime; 5) identity creation and self-expression (Alhabash–McAlister 2015. 4).

By mapping the motives for joining social networks such as Facebook, businesses can explore which factors they should act upon in order to trigger consumers joining the brand community established by the organization. Among these motives are 1) social connection (maintaining relationships with friends and acquaintances), 2) shared identities (developing new relationships with people with similar interests, e.g. through discovering new groups or communities), 3) content (exploring, consuming, sharing various contents), 4) social

network surfing (a sort of observation; gathering information about friends, friends of friends, etc.), 5) social investigation (gathering information about new acquaintances), and 6) status updating (monitoring SNS's news streams) (Joinson 2008).

Davis et al. (2014) identify five core drivers of use of brand communities in a social media context: functional, emotional, self-oriented, social and relational. A functional need is composed of information needs, access to responses, the evaluation of a service proposal, and the wish to access special offers. The emotional motivations for brand interaction can include the need for easing personal problems, the experience of feeling recognized, privileged, and the satisfaction of curiosity. Self-oriented brand consumption refers to the need for self-actualization and self-branding. The last two categories express the double role of brand communities in maintaining relationships. Social motivations represent the need to get to know and interact with other peers, members of a community. Relational motivations represent the need for interacting with the brand, for co-creating a service offering and for a personalized brand interaction, establish a personal relationship with the brand (Davis et al. 2014).

Methodology and sample characteristics

SMEs may have difficulties in properly using Facebook as a strategic marketing tool for they are facing a continuous and ever growing communication clutter. Moreover, lacking the proper marketing research tools, they have a limited knowledge of users' motivations and needs as members of their brand community. In this perspective, the main objective of this paper is to investigate users' narratives of their experience as members of various virtual brand communities of small businesses (limited in our study to catering establishments) in order to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What motives can be identified that drive the activity of fans of brand communities related to small businesses in the online sphere?

RQ2: How can these motives be characterized and utilized by small businesses?

While there is abundant research in the area concerning the motives of fanning brands' social media pages in general, we argue that the above-mentioned specificities of the SME marketing call for a targeted investigation of the topic. Based on our literature review, our prior assumptions were that while the general motives for fanning a SME brand's page will appear, enough specific elements will surface that will be useable in a specifically SME context.

To answer the research questions a content analysis was carried out. Content analysis is the study of recorded human communications, which is particularly well-suited to the study of communications as it encompasses psychoanalytical, institutional and cultural circumstances and contexts as well (Babbie 2003). An iterative coding process was applied, where codes were developed steadily during the coding process. By dint of their exploratory nature, our research questions were answered using a qualitative content analysis, which can be considered as the "art of understanding", as it examines individual approaches and it is interested in making sense of texts, by interpreting meanings of expressed ideas and the related consumer intentions.

In the design of our methodology, we followed the process suggested by Krippendorff (1989):

1) The focus of our research was narrowed to the selected industry of catering in order to offer a more homogenous, and therefore a more transparent and comparable environment for the study. "Eating and cooking motivates people very easily, and this is visible on their Facebook pages, too. A restaurant or confectionery communicating properly with their fans can attract them without serious campaigns" (Lévai 2012. 42). The study was equally narrowed to Facebook, the most widely used social networking site (hereafter: SNS) in Hungary, making it a channel of choice, and most often the sole reasonably available (in terms of affordability and manageability) marketing communications channel for small businesses.

2) Our empirical research is based on consumer narratives. The sample consists of short, one-page essays (n=151) written by university students (for extra credits) about their experience with the Facebook page of their favourite (and fanned[6]) small catering establishment. The

sample thus contains narratives about the pages of restaurants, cake shops, bakeries, cafés, and pubs.

3) The narratives were content analysed by two independent coders. Conflicts between the coders were resolved through discussion, providing an iterative coding process, and reaching a coding agreement of >80%. The process of analysis thus meets the criteria of reliability and relevance.

4) In a final stage, a discussion ensued and we proceeded to the final analysis of the coded narratives. Our results are summarized in the following part of the article.

Results of the study

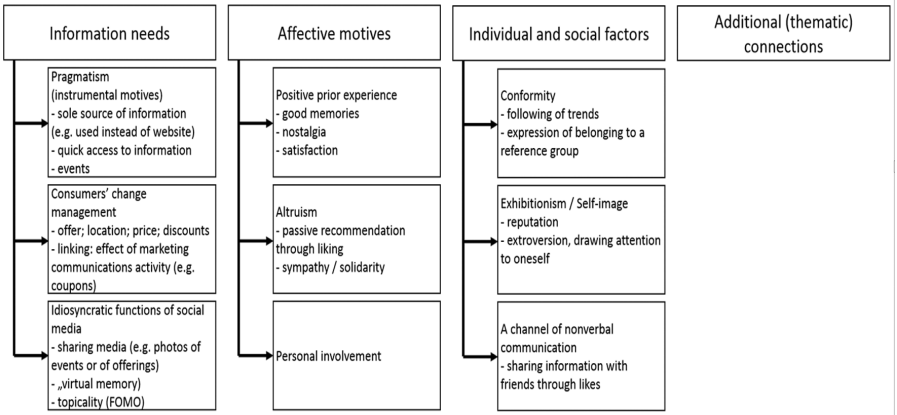
Self-declared triggers of fanning the official social page of a catering establishment were categorized in four categories during coding: 1) information needs, 2) affective motives, 3) individual and social factors, and 4) additional (thematic) connections. The first three categories largely support the main use motivations described by Alhabash and McAlister (2015), with the exception of the entertainment factor which is mostly irrelevant for the present context and does not appear as such in the present findings. Alternatively, the fourth category in our results gives an interesting insight into what other uses and associations might motivate consumers to become fans of such establishments (of which entertainment is only a sub-category).

In the following we present each category in detail. Figure 1 gives a graphic overview of our findings, while textual illustrations to each category and sub-category are provided in Tables 1–3. Sub-categories might overlap in some cases[7] in a complex motivational environment,

[6] In the text, we refer to the act of becoming a fan of an official Facebook page as "fanning". The word "liking" is often used in internet vernacular as a synonym of "fanning". However, for reasons of clarity, we advise for using this latter term in the context of becoming a fan of a social media page, as the notion of "liking" can also refer to the act of hitting the "like" button in the case of contents published by a given page.

[7] A typically overlapping element was the user narrative of a "regular hangout": liking such places' Facebook pages obviously fulfills the continued need for information, while the expression of a strong affective tie might equally be a strong motivator.

our goal in categorizing user motives was not to establish mutually exclusive categories, but rather to explore the main themes and factors that businesses ought to consider when developing a social media activity.



Source: own design

Figure 1. Categorization of inner motives of SNS users in the sample to become fans of small businesses

Information needs: A key pragmatic factor in visiting service providers' social media pages

The desire for acquiring and possessing resources is a key motivator for users' joining of (online) social networks, as this can help them reduce risks and give them an advantage over other users. One can distinguish between two main types of such resources: information and tangible assets (Markos-Kujbus 2013). The access to information not only enables individuals to quickly access testimonials and feedback, but thereby also reduces perceived risk.

Meeting information needs turned out to be a primary motive for liking small catering establishments' social media pages, with far the most mentions thereof in the sample. The overwhelming nature of these mentions might be counterintuitive, as brands' social media pages are hardly the best source for official, company-related information (e.g. in

contrast to official websites) or for user-generated information (e.g. in contrast to Facebook groups, social rating sites, etc.). However, the reason for the strength of this category in the present research context can be twofold. First, the particularity of small businesses as non-professional communicators, often being inherently more social than their corporate, institutional counterparts, and the lack of resources to maintain a diversified online presence and the subsequent attribute of a social media page being their sole official digital communication channel (often instead of an official website). Second, it can be closely related to a global change of consumer behaviour among certain target groups (e.g. the first and second generations of digital natives). This change of behaviour can be characterized by the use of social media sites as direct complements and even as substitutes to search engines and traditional websites (e.g. of official company information) in the processes of information search and decision making (Bronner–de Hoog 2014). It is however a surprising finding in the sample that – based on their self-declaration – a few respondents estimated that the above information need was reason enough to become fan of a service provider, even prior to visiting the given establishment.

As a first subcategory we identified consumer pragmatism and resource minimization. Users follow the principle of least effort during their browsing experience which leads to them first looking for information on channels they spend most of their browsing time on anyway. As content aggregators, SNS such as Facebook can offer users baseline information, thus reducing users' willingness to search for additional sources elsewhere (e.g. in the case of low involvement product and service categories, such as catering establishments, the focus of the present study).

The possibility to follow quick changes (e.g. current offers, updated product offerings) in a comfortable, aggregated way is the base of the next subcategory dubbed consumers' change management. The subcategory includes factors such as presentation of the product offering, (descriptive and visual) information about the location and site of an establishment, the possibility to follow current promotions, and

price-based communications. Altogether, this subcategory can be said to lie closest to businesses' traditional marketing efforts, with social media merely being a new manifestation and channel thereof. Based on this, one can presume that even if SNS are a novel way of gathering information, businesses cannot lose sight of consumers' traditional information needs: even if normative literature often associates SNS with a more long-term, brand- and relationship-focused strategy (Csordás et al. 2014), there seems to be a genuine demand for duplicating baseline consumer information to this channel.

As a next subcategory, SNS offer idiosyncratic functions with potential added marketing (communications) value for businesses. Such functions of Facebook are the possibility for businesses to distinctly manage events, photos (e.g. photos taken at events as a follow-up activity, or photos about the place or its offering as a means to tackle consumer uncertainty related to the intangibility of services (Csordás–Gáti 2014). The use of the internet as a "virtual memory" cannot be neglected either, where liking post or fanning pages can serve as a reminder for future use. On the contrary, the channel's topicality can help tackling users' fear of missing out (Przybylski et al. 2013), and offer a higher level of consumer experience at the same time by providing first-hand information.

Affective elements

As shown by the above-mentioned IBM study, consumers in social media seem to want to interact with brands directly in social media for mainly utilitarian reasons. Contrarily to the cognitive/information factor, affective elements pertain to users' emotional connection to the brand. While less important in number among the mentions, the various affective elements can bring about the social element in social media, i.e. can contribute to engage a genuinely interested part of the audience and thereby form long-term relationships with them.

The different types of social ties can play various roles in the marketing activities of the brand. Strong bonds operate through trust (in the sample, with consumer formulations like: "I instantly became a fan", "If at any time I go, I always find a familiar face", "I became totally

Table 1. Information need as a motive to fan small catering establishments' SNS pages

Category	Quote
pragmatism – quick information	"Facebook was the first to come to my mind for finding information – so I went there and looked the place up" (22, female)
pragmatism – quick information	"The Facebook page is already worth liking for practical reasons, as they upload their weekly menu here" (age: 21, female)
consumer change management (following for updates) – e.g.: product offering	"The main reason I became fan of the page was to know about what's happening at the place, and to be informed of the most important changes." (20, male)
consumer change management (following for updates) – e.g.: opening hours, promotions	„I liked to Facebook page of this [brand's]wine bar to know about the opening hours and the various promotions they offer" (28, male)
consumer change management (following for updates) – e.g.: promotions	"I liked their page about a year ago after having purchased a % reduction coupon on the internet – I wanted to know more about the place before I went there." (21, female)
access to idiosyncratic information – e.g.: benefits only available on SNS (here: discounts)	"I thought that maybe this way I can catch some promotion or novelty sometime, and I thought that maybe my 'membership' there will get me some discount in the future – as I saw some examples of this at other places." (20, female)
access to idiosyncratic information – e.g.: first-hand information about events	"I was happy to see their page on Facebook, that I immediately 'liked', because I can follow their events, that is, what kind of event will be there and when" (37, female)

Source: own research.

enchanted by the brand") contribute to generating interaction and e-wom (Seraj 2012), and forms a core of engaged fans of businesses' digital spaces. Brands reflecting one's inner or social self incite consumers to offer positive electronic word-of-mouth (e-wom) on social networks. Further, self-expressive brands fanned on social networks positively influence brand acceptance, and the forgiveness of engaged fans for potential wrongdoing (Wallace et al. 2012). Weaker bonds have a key role in further diffusing of e-wom. Small businesses therefore ought to identify and strengthen the various types of bonds thereby making e-wom appear more "naturally". The affective elements for doing so are discussed in the following.

Among the identified affective dimension, the principal element is the virtual manifestation of nostalgia, i.e. positive prior experience.

Here, the SNS appears as a genuine social link: by becoming fan of a place, respondents claim expressing their satisfaction with the establishment and a will to remain connected with the brand (as much as the memories linking them to it) as well as with like-minded consumers. Thus a sense of community appears. The pleasant memories related to the positive prior experience are a herald of subsequent acts of consumption and consumer loyalty. Thus, in the case of these users, SNS step forward as a customer relationship management tool for businesses.

Another manifestation of brand loyalty in our analysis is the subcategory dubbed altruism. Here, respondents mentioned that their liking of a brand's Facebook page was a sort of passive recommendation of the establishment for their friends. This way, users indirectly support their acquaintances without any expected compensation by providing them with a selection of quality knowledge or by thus trying to solve other acquaintances' problems (Brodie et al. 2013). In the case of small catering establishments, it is important for small businesses to try to map their regular customers' social status, as such altruistic behaviour is likely to generate a considerable amount of word-of-mouth in case of fans who are opinion leaders or social hubs in their virtual networks.

Similarly, connecting to virtual brand communities can be interpreted in some cases as the expression of solidarity with the activity of the establishment in question (Table 2, #4). Expressed sympathy can further be interpreted as an expression of a support for a proper functioning of the establishment's online community (Chiu et al. 2006), with a wider personal goal to support community development, and protecting the establishment from external threats (e.g. competitors).

Lastly, personal involvement is an interesting category. A few mentions in the sample leave to believe that the fact that the respondent is the owner, former or current employee, or other stakeholder (e.g. family member or friend of the owner) of a small catering establishment was the main reason for becoming fan of the establishment's Facebook page. This equally is the manifestation of solidarity: even though the

person who fans the brand page may not be themselves a customer of the establishment, they support its activity by generating e-wom for the brand. In the situation where SMEs are in lack of resources this subcategory is of primary importance for acquiring an initial core of community and exposure.

Table 2. Affective need as a motive to fan small catering establishments' SNS pages

Category	Quote
nostalgia (positive past experience)	"The main reason for me to like the page was that we have been long-time clients there, like since my childhood, and when they started their Facebook page, there was this opportunity for me to follow them there too." (21, female)
nostalgia (positive past experience)	"I 'liked' [the fast food restaurant's page] even before they opened the place, because I had been a regular client at their other joint and I was curious about this new endeavour of theirs." (21, female)
altruism and sympathy – passive support through fandom	"I believe that the effort made by the [brand] cheese manufacture to generate a renewed interest and appreciation for dairy products made of natural, quality ingredients was well worth my expressing of sympathy in a way or another." (21, female)
personal involvement	"I became a fan of the establishment's page right at its opening, because the founder was a friend of mine – I wanted to help them in their new business with my 'like', to become more renowned." (28, female)

Source: own research

Individual and social factors

Individual and social factors are another category with a dominance of affective elements. A reason for making them an individual main category is the added presence of human social needs. By definition, this category is the cornerstone of social media: here, respondents are motivated to fan a brand's page by being able to meet and develop their relationships with like-minded people, earn support, and express emotions (Hall–Graham 2004).

Within the category of individual and social needs, liking a brand page may be a response to something being popular: this is the subcategory of group conformity. Here, fanning a brand or an

establishment in SNS is externally motivated by them being topical and fashionable, already fanned by people with determining influence on the user who this way does not want to lag behind. Liking a fashionable establishment can thus be the effect of users' statement of being a member of their reference group (Forgas 1996) and up-to-date on matters important to the group. Small businesses need to identify and treat conformity likes with reservation, as the main driving force is not their own activity and performance, but rather a third-party element (a reference group or opinion leader), which may trigger collective user action. While this can lead to additional buzz about the company, it can also be left behind if the original driving force behind the likes backs out.

To the contrary, a self-centred motivation appears in the subcategory dubbed exhibitionism. Here, respondents suggested that becoming fans of these small businesses' pages was primarily motivated in the aim of shaping the image their acquaintances have of them. This implies that these respondents interpret SNS and their actions thereon as a concrete (virtual) manifestation of their own personality. By liking specific pages, users in the sample admit expecting a positive change in social visibility, popularity and reputation. This self-motivated act is led by a will of self-expression (Seraj 2012; Zhao et al. 2012). Previous research shows that extroverted people are more likely to participate in social activities on Facebook (Ross et al. 2009). Businesses therefore ought to identify opinion leaders with a certain level of exhibitionism, in order to raise their level of activity.

Based on the above, one can conclude that liking brand pages on Facebook can be interpreted as a personal form of nonverbal communication. By liking/fanning a page, a user actively communicates not only towards the company, but also their acquaintances, offering them information, about their preferences and about the establishment itself.

Table 3. Individual and social factors as a motive to fan small catering establishments' SNS pages

Category	Quote
exhibitionism, self-reputation	"[...] with my friends we love a bit too much having 'party photos' made of us – as these are then mostly made available at the places' FB pages" (21, female)
exhibitionism, self-reputation	"[...] this was also my main motivation for "liking" their page, because I wanted that to appear on my profile page" (21, female)
following of trends, drawing attention to oneself	"Not the least, one can also shape their image by carefully choosing what they like or what they post [on Facebook]. This restaurant has a style that fits my style and image, so I thought that I can approve that." (24, female)
conformity, reference groups	"I believe that I belong to a group this way, and I can show my friends the changes that I have made concerning my eating habits" (21, male)
conformity, reference groups	"[…] one reason was to show my acquaintances that I've been there […]" (20, female)
nonverbal communication–sharing information with friends	"[…] the first time I came out of there after having a hamburger I had the impression that it was so good that I needed to share the experience with others." (22, male)
nonverbal communication–sharing information with friends	"I simply wanted to express that I like that joint, and also to call my friends' attention to this place – and by this, basically, I recommend it to them, to try it out." (21, female)

Source: own research

Motives of the third kind: thematic connections

Other factors, while having received far less mention, can be an interesting supplement to the aforementioned motives and thus to a small firms' targeted social communications. We classified as a thematic connection a respondent's motive to fan a small establishment's Facebook page for professional curiosity. While not present in our sample, this subcategory can easily be extended to include the social monitoring of competition by businesses, an accessible tool which is available to businesses devoid of access to professional marketing research services.

Another respondent mentioned being impressed by the style and decoration of an establishment, which she mentioned as being the primary reason for her fanning the Facebook page. This finding suggests a potential communication niche available for small businesses for

appealing to potential consumers through elements loosely related to the business' core activity. This communication activity can be related to that of content marketing, which is argued to require talent (an aforementioned potential competitive advantage of small businesses), technology (made available by social media) and content acceptance (founded by the user activity of fanning the organization) (Pulizzi 2012). Content marketing itself can be an alternative strategy whereby a business bases its communication not on its core activity but on consumer needs aiming for the connection to various, loosely related consumer tribes (Cova–Cova 2002).

Conclusions, limitations and future research directions

In our study of consumer motives for becoming fans of small catering establishments' social media pages, the traditional cognitive, affective and conative dimensions all appear as important drivers of online consumer participation. The significance of the results is that it gives a structured overview – along the main functions offered by social media (here: Facebook) – of the consumers' self-declared motives (based on a narrative analysis) for being part of virtual communities related to small businesses. Based on our review, where both instrumental and affective motives appeared, it is important to distinguish between short-term and long-term social management tools and actions. This way, our study shows that consumers might become fans of an establishment for purely practical reasons, which serve their instant needs. These "fans" constitute a brand's first line of reached target audience in social media. It is then the organization's responsibility to handle their communities (both offline and online) along their interests, and to serve their (information, affective, etc.) needs on a long-term, to generate user engagement.

Our results also confirm that social media is taking over the place of owned official channels (e.g. official websites) in satisfying various consumer needs: it is in the interest of small businesses to follow – by necessity – this trend, and expand the circle of those businesses relying on social media, a channel on the verge of paid and earned media

(thereby implying a certain loss of control). In exchange, social media channels can build upon a few competitive advantages of small companies, namely their relationship-based and intuitive nature.

As a qualitative study, our results are limited in scope, as they give an in-depth analysis of self-declared consumer narratives gained through convenience sampling. While not generalizable, the chosen sample was deemed relevant as the age group of now-university students falls into the generation of the "digital natives", for whom digital and social media become primary sources of information. Based on our results and the limitations, further research should be directed towards the changes in consumer behaviour memberships in online fan communities trigger. To complete our results, recording actual consumer behaviours might be a relevant further research direction. To amplify the relevance of the above results, online community behaviours (e.g. user-generated contents such as ratings, reviews, discussions, or visual contents) ought to be compared with observed actual business performance. To amplify validity, other sectors with important SME activity (e.g. agri-food) ought to be included in future studies.

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